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- 1 Writers deal in images; this raises the question not only of the nature of an image, but also of the nature of imagelessness. We may speak of images of objects, or of objects themselves functioning as images, symbols, or metaphors. But what if, in Shelley's phrase, "the deep truth is imageless?" (*Prometheus Unbound*, 2.4.116, Shelley, 234) Can we possibly make images of this imagelessness? Perhaps the closest an author or artist can come to this is to create images from the natural world which give an overwhelming impression of blankness, of desolation or of sensory deprivation.
- 2 In what follows, I shall discuss images of such a blankness in three of Joseph Conrad's short stories: "The Warrior's Soul" (first published in *Land and Water*, 1917), "Prince Roman" (first published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, 1911) and "The Tale" (first published in *Strand Magazine*, 1917). These stories, originally collected in 1925 in *Tales of Hearsay*, (Conrad 1995, Vol. XXII, 1-81) have recently been reissued by Hesperus Press in a single volume entitled *The Tale*. (Conrad, 2008) All three tales have as their background the representation of blankness under the aspect of whiteness, silence or obscurity, or a combination of these. Moreover, this blankness is not *merely* a background, but functions almost as a protagonist in each of the tales.
- 3 These images not only have a peculiar phenomenological status as "images of imagelessness", and as definite descriptions of a vague phenomenon, but they are also remarkable for their existential function, that is, for the way they impinge on the characters' sense of their own existential status in the universe.
- 4 Philosophical analyses of blankness often tend either to follow Burke's conception of blankness as sublimity, or Schopenhauer's conception of it as the absolute of absolutes, functioning as an apotheosis of pessimism or nihilism; it might be tempting to classify Conrad's use of the theme under either of these heads – or indeed to see it as a combination of the two. Blankness and obscurity is also a common modernist trope: the

nineteenth-century fogs of Sherlock Holmes's London, symbolic of danger, criminality and the unknown, take on a new dimension in the yellow fog of *Prufrock*, or the brown fog which covers the unreal city of London in *The Waste Land* (I. 60-61; III, 207-208, Eliot, 62, 68): these are fogs in which the old ethical and onto-theological certainties, and, indeed, the very notion of a stable self seem to dissolve. The misty London of Conrad's *The Secret Agent* could be said to be an intermediate stage between Conan Doyle and Eliot.

- 5 However, the essential nature of blankness as conveyed in Conrad can, I believe, be best understood with reference, neither to Schopenhauer nor to Eliot and the Bergsonian philosophy which influenced him, but to Heidegger. Images of blankness, both in these short stories and in the major novels, have a complex double function of a concealing and of an unveiling which closely corresponds to the Heideggerean concept of truth as *alētheia*. *Alētheia* was initially defined by Heidegger as truth seen as an uncovering issuing from primordial concealment rather than as a mere rightness or correctness. Its etymology is compounded of the privative prefix *a-* (not) and the verbal stem – *lath* ("to escape notice", "to be concealed."). For Heidegger, though this truth can be found in *logos* or discourse as a means of letting-something-be-seen, it is found even more primordially in *aesthēsis* or the sheer sensory perception of something. (Heidegger 1995, 57) It is, however, an uncovering which can never be complete since it can only unveil phenomena, not that which lies behind them. The relation of *alētheia* to concealment is not, however, that of simple negation. To quote from "The Essence of Truth":

Concealment deprives *alētheia* of disclosure yet does not render it *sterēsis* (privation); rather, concealment preserves what is most proper to *alētheia* as its own. Considered with respect to truth as disclosedness, concealment is then undisclosedness and accordingly the untruth which is most proper to the essence of truth. (Heidegger 1996, 130)

- 6 Now the action of uncovering is also that which marks the distinction between a *mystery* (by definition veiled) and a *marvel* (by definition exposed), though we may also say that a mystery has to be partially disclosed in order for us to be aware of its very existence, and a marvel should retain an aspect of secrecy in order for us to wonder at it. As Heidegger points out: "The proper nonessence of truth is the mystery [...] But [...] the nonessence remains always in its own way essential to the essence and never becomes unessential in the sense of irrelevant." (Heidegger 1996, 130-1)
- 7 Mystery is a point of connection between Heidegger's emphasis on un-covering and un-concealment and his exposition of the theme of wonder. Wonder or marvelling, the ancient Greek *thaumadzein*, clearly distinguished from the desire to solve specific puzzles or riddles, is, for Heidegger, the originary mood or *Grundstimmung* of the period of the first, Greek beginning of philosophy, which has been replaced in the modern period by *Angst* as *Grundstimmung* – though in developments of his thought by Sartre and Levinas we might find the alternative of nausea, indifference or apathy put forward as the basic mood of our times.
- 8 My reading of Conrad will, however, suggest that there are moments in which wonder and *Angst* are indistinguishable, but that nevertheless, wonder is not inevitably accompanied by *Angst*. Conrad gives us moments of pure wonder and of wonder fused with terror, delight or world-weariness. Rather than giving a priority to any of these alternatives I would like to suggest that these various existential states are not as opposed to each other as they initially appear to be. I would venture to go perhaps a little further than Heidegger himself does and say that *uncovering* itself is a *basic mood*

more fundamental than either wonder, horror or the profound sense of indifference, all of which come into existence when the veil of the familiar is torn away.

- 9 Such unveilings almost invariably provoke existential crises in Conrad's protagonists as they are exposed to an overwhelming mood which may take the form of wonder, horror, resistance, indifference or confusion. Wonder itself, in Conrad, is often troubling and disturbing – not far removed from the disclosure of horror or meaninglessness, as is suggested by the epigraph from Boethius which he uses for *The Mirror of the Sea*: *for this miracle or this wonder troubleth me right gretly*. In my interpretation, all these various moods have the aspect of *alētheia*: the uncovering of a truth which is neither a correct answer nor a revelation promising future guidance – not even a secularised revelation, such as a Joycean epiphany or what Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, called a "spot of time." The first miraculous opening out of the east before the youthful eyes of Marlow, the strange indifference which overtakes Decoud in the midst of his struggles on the lighter in the Golfo Placido and Kurtz's dying exclamation are, in a sense, aspects of the same phenomenon. This phenomenon is repeated again and again in the major fiction as characters confronted with blankness, mystery and isolation experience existential crisis; I have elsewhere discussed in more detail the function of unveiling, spectrality and the experience of open spaces in the novels. (Tomkinson, 2004, 2005, 2011) Classic examples are Willems' panic in the face of his fate as an outcast; the sleepless nights confronted with the blankness of the sea which lead to Decoud's suicide in *Nostromo* and Lena's horror of the empty seascape in *Victory*. However, the image of imagelessness which is closest to those in the short stories to be discussed here is Razumov's vision of the snow and stars in *Under Western Eyes* as he makes his decision to report the fugitive Haldin to the authorities:

He cast his eyes upwards and stood amazed. The snow had ceased to fall, and now, as if by a miracle, he saw above his head the clear black sky of the northern winter, decorated with the sumptuous fires of the stars. It was a canopy fit for the resplendent purity of the snows.

Razumov received an almost physical impression of countless space and of countless millions.

He responded to it with the readiness of a Russian who is born to an inheritance of space and numbers. Under the sumptuous immensity of the sky, the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history. (Conrad 1995, Vol. XII, 33)

- 10 Here the confrontation with blankness leads to a phenomenon of unveiling, in this case of the horror of loneliness, but an unveiling which is, by definition, transient. The author comments:

Who knows what true loneliness is – not the conventional word, but the naked terror? To the lonely itself it wears a mask. The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion. Now and then a fatal compunction of events may lift the veil for an instant. For an instant only. No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad. Razumov had reached that point of vision. (Conrad 1995, Vol. XII, 39)

- 11 Wonder itself has the same necessarily transient quality, as is stressed in a passage in *Nostromo* describing the rapidity with which Dr Monygham gets over his surprise at seeing the Capataz alive:

There is no more evanescent quality in an accomplished fact than its wonderfulness. Solicited incessantly by the considerations affecting its fears and

desires, the human mind turns naturally away from the marvellous side of events. And it was in the most natural way possible that the doctor asked this man whom only two minutes before he believed to have been drowned in the gulf-  
 "You have seen somebody up there? Have you?" (Conrad 1995, Vol. VIII, 425)

- 12 These words recall Heidegger's aphorism on the transience of wonder in "On the Essence of Truth": "*Dasein* is a turning into need." (Heidegger, 1996, 134)

- 13 Yet, at the same time, the very nature and essence of human life in time, as distinct from eternity, depends on this continual *possibility* of unveiling. As Razumov asks Haldin:

Can you conceive secret places in Eternity? Impossible. Whereas life is full of them. There are secrets of birth, for instance. One carries them on to the grave. [...] And there are secret motives of conduct. A man's most open actions have a secret side to them. That is interesting and so unfathomable! The most unlikely things have secret power over one's thoughts— [...].

- 14 This passage is very close to Heidegger's emphasis on the primordial nature of secrecy for the this-worldly *Dasein*:

The concealment of beings as a whole, untruth proper, is older than every openedness of this or that being [...] mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such holds sway throughout man's Da-sein. (Heidegger 1996, 130)

- 15 In the three short stories under consideration the sense of primordial mystery and transient unveiling is presented intensely through a series of imageless images. In "The Warrior's Soul", the imageless image is the terrible muffling blankness of the snow through which Napoleon's Grand Army makes its ill-fated retreat from Moscow: a white blankness which is at once a contrast to the brutal images of warfare and complicit with them, since its extremity of cold is capable of inflicting even greater suffering than bayonets and bullets. It is, one might suggest, a heart of whiteness no less terrifying than the heart of darkness which Marlow finds in the Congo. The story opens as an old Russian officer and veteran of this campaign rebukes his young listeners for some ignorant remark whose exact nature we never learn, though it is probably a reproach to the Russian forces of the day for actually letting any of the defeated French escape. He tells them: "Is it possible that you youngsters have no more sense than that? Some of you had better wipe the milk off your upper lip before you start to pass judgement on the few poor stragglers of a generation which has done and suffered not a little in its time." (Conrad 1995, Vol. XXII, 1) This innocent, if insulting, image of milk on the upper lip is to take on new resonances in what follows, firstly, as the old officer begins a laconic account of the tragedy which moves swiftly on into a hell of milky whiteness:

We opposed open spaces to French impetuosity, then we offered them an interminable battle so that their army went at last to sleep in its positions lying down on the heaps of its own dead. Then came the wall of fire in Moscow. It toppled down on them.

Then began the long rout of the Grand Army. I have seen it stream on, like the doomed flight of haggard, spectral sinners across the innermost frozen circle of Dante's *Inferno*, ever widening before their despairing eyes. (Conrad 1995, Vol. XXII, 1)

- 16 The engagement he has been describing before the narrative opens is one in which both sides were fighting, not so much for victory, as for a single night's shelter in the houses of the contested village, and the supporting troops are standing out in the open, in the narrator's words:

[...] freezing in a tempestuous north wind which drove the snow on earth and the great masses of clouds in the sky at a terrific pace. The very air was inexpressively solemn by contrast with the white earth. I have never seen God's creation look more sinister than on that day. (2)

- 17 Here we have not merely the simple horror of white spaces, but the sense that they somehow function as a *Gestalt*, changing the perceived quality of the adjacent entity. Certainly the extreme whiteness of snow could make a grey sky seem darker and more forbidding. However, the strangeness of the composite image presented here comes from the fact that what is spoken of is a contrast with the *air* rather than the sky, with something which is by its very nature colourless and invisible. Whiteness is spoken of as intensifying, not *greyness*, but *solemnity*. Then, as a further backdrop to this strange interchange of the visible and the invisible, we have the jarring yet co-existent concepts of the world as "God's creation" and as a sinister place. This theme will be developed as the narrator's sense of the blankness of the cosmos intensifies after the Russians have charged the main column of the Grand Army:

I was no longer sleepy. Indeed, I had become awake with an exaggerated mental consciousness of existence extending beyond my immediate surroundings. Those are but exceptional moments with mankind, I am glad to say. I had the immediate experience of the earth in all its enormous expanse wrapped in snow, with nothing showing in it but trees with their straight, stalk-like trunks and their funeral verdure; and in this aspect of general mourning I seemed to hear the sighs of mankind falling to die in the midst of a nature without life. They were Frenchmen. We didn't hate them; they did not hate us; we had existed far apart <sup>≠</sup> and suddenly they had come rolling in with arms in their hands, without fear of God, carrying with them other nations, and all to perish together in a long, long trail of frozen corpses. I had an actual vision of that trail: a pathetic multitude of small dark mounds stretching away under the moonlight in a clear, still, and pitiless atmosphere <sup>≠</sup> a sort of horrible peace. [...] I don't know by what connection of emotions there came into my head the thought that the world was a pagan planet and not a fit abode for Christian virtues. (20)

- 18 This is the moment of *alētheia*, where we have here a kind of negative epiphany, striking not only in its bleak conclusion, but in the emphasis on the vagueness of the process by which it is achieved: a precise consciousness of the indefinite. This is the scene against which the tragic *dénouement* is enacted, as the main character in the story, Tomossov, appears with a French prisoner, De Castel, who at the behest of a lady with whom they were both in love, had warned him to escape Paris before he could be arrested as part of the entourage of the Russian envoy. De Castel seems a kind of distillation or personification of the blank forces of nature which surround him: he is an apparition that wears

[...] a shining crested helmet on its head and was muffled up in a white cloak. The cloak was not as white as snow. Nothing in the world is. It was white more like mist, with an aspect which was ghostly and martial to an extraordinary degree. (21)

- 19 However, this god of war can hardly walk: he is in agony from frostbite, "a miserable thing that cannot die." (24) He repeatedly begs Tomossov to kill him, not because of his physical pain but because, he claims, all faith and courage are dead in him. Finally, after being taunted with another white word which echoes the opening of the story: "Milksop", (25) Tomassov shoots him. In doing so he sacrifices his own military career, becoming the "predestined victim" (26) of inverted hypocrisy and being fated "to bury himself in the depths of his province, where a vague story of some dark deed clung to him for years." (26) Yet the story ends with an image of strange peace as Tomassov

kneels over the body of the man he has killed, with an expression of what can only be called a sublime blankness:

He had taken off his cap and his hair shone like gold in the light drift of flakes that had begun to fall. He was stooping over the dead in a tenderly contemplative attitude. And his young, ingenuous face, with lowered eyelids, expressed no grief, no sternness, no horror – but was set in the repose of a profound, as if endless and endlessly silent meditation. (26)

20 If, in "The Warrior's Soul", blankness seems to win a victory over all human endeavour, in the earlier story, "Prince Roman", the only work of Conrad's set in his native Poland, it is a background against which a thoroughly admirable and heroic character is more clearly defined. We see Prince Roman against the blank snowscapes of Poland and the even greater blankness of his own deafness, the "soundless world [...] like an abode of silent shades" (50) in which he is constrained to dwell. Then we learn his story: that this scion of an illustrious Polish family was once an ordnance officer in the service of the Czar, who though on indefinite leave after the illness and death of his young wife, resigned his commission upon the outbreak of the Polish national uprising and fled *incognito* to serve in the patriotic cause.

21 When, after the failure of this rising, he was imprisoned and his identity uncovered, he refused to put forward the plea for mercy suggested by his captors: that he acted impulsively because his mind was unhinged by grief. Instead, he wrote on a piece of paper that he joined the national rising "from conviction". (52) He was punished with twenty-five years of virtual slavery, first in the mines of Siberia and then as a common soldier in the Caucasus devoid of all civil rights and forbidden to communicate with anyone: "For all practical purposes except that of suffering he was a dead man." (53) Yet when finally allowed to return to his estates, he is the archetype of the hero unbroken by adversity, devoting his life and fortune to the help of his fellow men.

22 The narrator, now an aging man, speaks of a childhood meeting with Prince Roman in his uncle's house, on a winter's day when he had escaped from the schoolroom hoping to receive news of the death or exploits of a certain wolf. He tells us:

In my anxiety to hear about a particularly wolfish wolf, I came in momentary contact with a man who was pre-eminently a man amongst men capable of feeling deeply, of believing steadily, of loving ardently. (54)

23 That is, with a man whose nature seems completely the antithesis of blankness and vagueness, which are again the qualities of surrounding nature at the moment of the narrator's encounter with Roman. Although the brutal cold of winter has a softer aspect than in "The Warrior's Soul", seen as it is as the view from the window of a comfortable country house, it has the same blank splendour as that associated in the later story with the retreat of the Grand Army:

It was the dead of winter. The great lawn in front was as pure and smooth as a snowfield, a white and feathery level sparkling under the sun as if sprinkled with diamond dust, declining gently to the lake – a long sinuous piece of frozen water looking more solid than the earth. A cold brilliant sun glided low above an undulating horizon of great folds of snow in which the villages of Ukrainian peasants remained out of sight, like clusters of boats hidden in the hollows of a running sea. (31-32)

24 The initial impression of this snowy landscape as a mere frame for the tale is deceptive. The blankness described here is not simply a *Gestalt* against which the admirable qualities of a hero who did not lose faith and courage show forth more distinctly. It also



connects with another blank landscape which had a complex connection to the Prince's initial decision to join the patriotic movement: the almost featureless Polish landscape of his childhood where "Far away to the north the great Lithuanian forest faced the sun, no higher than a hedge; and to the south, the way to the plains, the vast brown spaces of the earth touched the blue sky." (38)

- 25 Prince Roman's moment of *alētheia*, or truth as uncovering, comes when the sight of this landscape being violated by the movements of the Russian army, first revealed as a "low dense cloud of dark dust" and then as "an immense reptile creeping over the fields", (41) mysteriously blends with his feelings for his dead wife: he shortly afterwards explains to his personal servant that this death has opened his eyes to "unsuspected truths" (43) and that he is going "where something louder than my grief and yet something with a voice very like it calls me." (42) Neither the voice nor the truths are ever clearly defined and yet they are both revealed and concealed in that image of the landscape. The conviction of the Prince, though unflexible in the face of death and hardship, does not have the clarity of an abstract political view emerging from a chain of reasoning: there are aspects of vagueness, even of blankness, in its origins:

He remembered that the day before he had seen a reptile-like convoy of soldiery, bristling with bayonets, crawling over the face of that land which was his. The woman he loved had been his, too. Death had robbed him of her. Her loss had been to him a moral shock. It had opened his heart to a greater sorrow, his mind to a vaster thought, his eyes to all the past and to the existence of another love fraught with pain but as mysteriously imperative as that lost one to which he had entrusted his happiness. (41)

- 26 The causes of his courage and resistance can thus be said to be as overwhelming and yet as vague as the reasons for De Castel's feeling of existential defeat.
- 27 In "The Tale", the image of blankness is a sea fog, simultaneously a cause and symbol of obscurity, both background and agent in the unfolding of a moral dilemma and its ensuing tragedy. Here the mood of the protagonist (who is also the narrator although this fact is concealed until the end from the listening woman who constitutes his audience) is neither the ultimate despair of De Castel nor the resilience of Prince Roman, but one of anguish and confusion.
- 28 The tale is narrated in "crepuscular light" by the side of a "deep, shadowy couch holding the shadowy suggestion of a reclining woman" (59) but its action takes place in "an evanescent dark loom with a narrow border of angry foam at its foot" (68), that is, in a cove in which the fog is so thick that one might be a thousand miles out in the open sea. It is presumably a British cove, though the tale is initially related as taking place in a vaguely defined parallel world to our own. It is a place where blankness prevails:
- The ship was stopped, all sounds ceased, and the very fog became motionless, growing denser and as if solid in its amazing dumb immobility. The men at their stations lost sight of each other. Footsteps sounded stealthy; rare voices, impersonal and remote, died out without resonance. A blind white stillness took possession of the world. (67)
- 29 The gaps and gleams of vision in the blankness of the fog are equally sinister and otherworldly:
- Now and then it would thin out mysteriously, revealing to the men a more or less ghostly presentment of their ship. Several times the shadow of the coast itself swam darkly before their eyes through the fluctuating opaque brightness of the great cloud clinging to the water. (68)



- 30 It is in this cove, within sight of the home coastline, yet seeming as isolated and remote as any of Conrad's far-flung and exotic locations, that the character known as the Commanding Officer takes refuge from the fog only to find that another ship has joined him, commanded by a Northman. It is a time of war and the officer suspects neutral ships of dropping supplies for German submarines. The stealthiness of submarine warfare is especially despised by the narrator and linked with the terrible blankness of the sea in wartime which gives no sign of anything being amiss with the world, but where you know that someday you will die from something you have not seen:

[...] When the night came trailing over the sea, hiding what looked like the hypocrisy of an old friend, it was a relief. The night blinds you frankly – and there are circumstances when the sunlight might grow as odious to one as falsehood itself. Night is all right.

At night the commanding officer could let his thoughts get away – I won't tell you where. Somewhere where there was no choice but between truth and death. But thick weather, though it blinded one, brought no such relief. Mist is deceitful, the dead luminosity of the fog is irritating. It seems that you *ought* to see. [...] (64)

- 31 The Northman's shifty and drunken behaviour, his sympathetic comments on those in economic difficulties who might assist the Germans for profit, the fact that his engines are under steam despite the weather conditions and his tales of previous engine trouble, and perhaps above all, the complete and uncanny silence maintained by his ship arouse suspicion in the Commanding Officer, who questions the Northman's story that he is completely lost. He feels himself confronted with the wall-like solidity of an enormous lie which assumes the characteristics of the surrounding fog. Finally, he tells the Northman that he must leave the cove despite the weather conditions, and as what he considers "a supreme test" (80) he gives him a course which leads him to his destruction on a rocky ledge. This proves that indeed the Northman did not know where he was, but proves nothing with regard to his guilt in assisting the submarines: the Commanding Officer does not know whether he has "added to the corpses that litter the bed of the unreadable sea the bodies of men completely innocent or basely guilty". (80) The blankness and obscurity of nature reflects the Officer's final blankness of moral judgement with regard to his action, even as it also reveals his capacity for ruthlessness and his own horror thereof.
- 32 The mood, which Heidegger might have called the *Grundstimmung*, of the three tales in question is thus different in each case, yet despair, resolution and moral confusion share the same origin and essence, arising as they do from similar encounters of the individual with images of blankness. As previously stated, such experiences are also endemic in Conrad's better-known fiction; however, in conclusion, I would suggest that the genre of the short story allows Conrad to present in intensified form a preoccupation with the essence of blankness and its effect on the human being in confrontation with the world. In the context of a shorter piece of writing, with fewer intricacies of plot, these images not only occupy a greater proportion of the text, but loom larger in the imagination.

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## ABSTRACTS

Le présent article étudie le vide en tant qu'image dans trois nouvelles de Joseph Conrad : « The Warrior's Soul », « Prince Roman » et « The Tale ». Dans les trois, on trouve des corrélats de ce vide dans la blancheur, le silence et l'obscurité que l'on analysera, dans un premier temps, à travers leur position phénoménologique paradoxale en tant que représentations de l'irreprésentable. On se penchera, ensuite, sur la « fonction existentielle » de ces représentations dont le rôle est à la fois de révéler et de dissimuler. Pour ce faire, on aura recours au concept d'*alētheia*, venant de la philosophie de Heidegger. Il sera observé que les révélations issues de ces représentations déclenchent des crises existentielles chez les protagonistes qui sont, de ce fait, exposés à l'horreur, l'émerveillement, l'aporie, l'indifférence ou la confusion. Conrad se sert ici des exigences intrinsèques, liées à l'économie de moyens et la condensation des composants poétiques de la nouvelle pour exposer son intérêt pour l'essence du vide et ses effets sur la psychologie de l'individu de manière encore plus compacte qu'il ne le fait dans ses romans où le vide constitue également un thème récurrent.

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Fiona Tomkinson has lectured in the English Language and Literature Department at Yeditepe University, Istanbul since 1997, where she also gives MA classes in the Philosophy Department. She also lectures part-time in the Philosophy Department at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. She

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